

Business Retention and Expansion Case Study: Growing in the GreenSeam

Introduction

Serving the food and agriculture industries of southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, GreenSeam LLC brings a unique cluster-based brand of economic development to the Upper Midwest. Based in Mankato, Minnesota, GreenSeam aims to position the region as a “first-class food and agriculture epicenter” through four key initiatives: business attraction, workforce development, regional branding, and business retention and expansion (BRE). Though BRE is just one area of focus, these efforts are invaluable to GreenSeam’s broader strategy, and the program’s cluster-based foundation and one-day visitation model offer a fresh perspective on how BRE activities may be reformulated across the field.

Cluster Focus

A distinctive feature of GreenSeam’s BRE program is its focus on a broad industry cluster rather than a specific set of municipalities. While many traditional BRE programs are centered around businesses in a specific city, GreenSeam’s model takes a more holistic approach by targeting a large industrial sector — namely, food and agriculture in the Midwest. This “cluster” is made up of a diverse group of businesses ranging from agricultural producers to equipment manufacturers, all of which have a common interest in working together to strengthen industry in the region. As GreenSeam Economic Development Coordinator Holly Callaghan describes the organization’s philosophy, “A rising tide raises all ships.”

GreenSeam’s decision to focus exclusively on this cluster stems from its vital importance to the regional economy. Agriculture has long served as an economic backbone for the Midwest, and ensuring the retention and expansion of businesses in this sector is vital for the long-term health of communities in states like Minnesota and Iowa. As Callaghan points out, “What else will grow the region?” Eventually, the organization hopes that the name “GreenSeam” will become synonymous with the agricultural Midwest in the same way that “Silicon Valley” or “Wall Street” represent industry in other regions of the country.



BRE Days

Conducting large surveys such as the annual “State of Ag” report naturally led GreenSeam to incorporate business visits into its BRE program. Unlike programs serving a single municipality, however, scheduling individual visits with businesses on a periodic basis is not well-suited for the sheer number of clients in the multistate GreenSeam area. Instead, the organization holds dedicated “BRE Days” in which staff visit a community and meet with as many businesses as possible over the course of a single day. This system is reminiscent of the “business walks” or “blitz” approach used in recent years by some municipality-driven economic development organizations, albeit applied on a larger scale.

When identifying communities to visit during BRE Days, GreenSeam considers factors such as agribusiness presence, connections to investors, and population size. Targeted communities are typically home to several major employers and at least 3,000 residents. GreenSeam staff work with local chambers of commerce and economic development agencies to gauge interest, scheduling business visits with employers after a host location is chosen. The one-day format makes it easy for GreenSeam and other organizations to promote the event as a special occasion through press releases, attracting the attention of the business community and encouraging participation.

During each BRE Day, a team of 8–12 visitors are split into 2 x 2 groups to complete three sets of business visits each. The team is typically made up of GreenSeam staff members, GreenSeam investors, and occasionally even volunteers from the local economic development community who may be interested in assisting. The sample size of visits may be small from a statistical perspective (usually fewer than 10), but these conversations allow GreenSeam to pick out important regional themes and, perhaps more importantly, develop meaningful relationships with business owners. In addition, participating local economic development officials gain hands-on experience with business visits and may want to implement their own visitation scheme for the community going forward, if one does not already exist.

At the end of a BRE Day, all businesses in the community are invited to an informal networking reception, regardless of whether not they participated in earlier business visits. Drinks and appetizers are served in a casual “chamber-style” setting, allowing employers, local leaders, and other stakeholders to connect and potentially build new business relationships. GreenSeam staff often note the success of these networking events, pointing out that the connections established here — while difficult to quantify — can benefit the community in ways that may not otherwise have been possible.



GreenSeam sees this as one of the most valuable aspects of its BRE Days and hopes to expand upon this concept in future programs.

Conclusion

GreenSeam's model highlights how a BRE program necessarily must adapt to meet the needs of the community that it serves. By focusing on a particular industry cluster across a large geographic area, one-day community visits allow the organization to use its resources most efficiently to create lasting impact across the GreenSeam. More traditional approaches will continue to be appropriate for many BRE applications, but GreenSeam's innovations may plant the seeds of creativity for other organizations looking to better serve their communities in novel ways.

Special thanks to Holly Callaghan, GreenSeam Economic Development Coordinator, for her assistance with this project. To learn more about GreenSeam and its BRE program, please visit greenseam.org.

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